

# What is *social* about social work?

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*Abstract:* It has been argued that the applied nature of social work renders the appreciation of social theory by practitioners as unnecessary. This paper takes issue with this controversial stance and shows how social work itself can not be understood outside of the social context in which it is located. This social context, however, is said to be changing: the world in which we currently inhabit is vastly different to that of our immediate forbears. This has prompted social work theorists to consider the implications for the profession and the role of practitioners. This paper reflects upon the underpinning principles of the competing perspectives and concludes that, given the complexities involved as well as the responsibilities with which social workers are charged, social theory is an essential component of the practitioner's education.

*Key words:* social work, social theory, social change.

This paper originates in a presentation for a symposium held at Lancaster University on 16th-17th September, 2004. Its aim is to explore some problems in contemporary social work theory and, in particular, some intersections between social work theory's diagnosis of its contemporary contexts, on the one hand, and wider themes in social science, on the other. My argument is that theory is fundamental to social work practice and that theoretical sophistication is a necessary foundation for any claim that social work has a progressive remit. An effective illustration of the intrinsically theoretical character of social work can be found embedded in the very title of the symposium for which this paper was developed. The event was headed *Changing Social Work* – a phrase that betrays several different possible meanings. For example, it might be taken to designate a reflection on 'changing social' work: that is, an exploration of work that is applied to a social that is changing in some way. Alternatively, it may be taken to refer to changing-social work: that is a consideration of a kind of work that somehow changes the social. Or, again, it may be taken to indicate a discussion of changing 'social work:' that is, a concern with changing a type of work which is in some way social.

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There are, of course, several more possibilities but already it is clear that to follow through the implications of each of these meanings in any serious sense requires some theoretical sophistication. Exactly how much is required is open to debate but it requires at least some. How much more sophistication, then, is demanded to grasp the personal, cultural, economic and historical influences that push and pull the lives and life-chances of social services user groups? I pose this question right at the outset because when I was doing the research for the paper I encountered a statement from Minister for Health, Jacqui Smith, who suggests that:

Social work is a very practical job. It is about protecting people and changing their lives, not about being able to give a fluent and theoretical explanation of why they got into difficulties in the first place. (Jacqui Smith, the Minister for Health, quoted in Crawford & Walker, 2003: vii)

Now, I have no difficulty in accepting the suggestion that social work is a practical activity but I do have two problems with Jacqui Smith's formulation of it. First, theoretical fluency is portrayed here in opposition to practical competence and, I suggest, a burden on that competence. It is something that social work is 'not about.' This seems a somewhat strange idea because if social work is about changing people's lives – if it carries that *political* duty – then it is crucial that social workers are theoretically sophisticated. Changing people's lives is not something to be done lightly. At the very least, it is preferable for social workers to provide 'fluent and theoretical' explanations for what they are doing, rather than explanations that are incoherent and illogical.

Second, whatever readers of this paper think personally about the value of theoretical fluency, it remains the case that Jacqui Smith has actually identified and validated a tension that runs through social work: how can the practical activity be understood and what are its consequences. The tension is most clearly visible in social work's 'practice theory' – where the overall aim of social work, à la Jacqui Smith, is to change people's lives and the context where the changes occur is the 'social.' Thus, on the one hand, there is an enormous quantity of literature devoted to exploring the work ('practice') of social workers. On the other hand, there is very little that explores what, precisely, is social about that practice or what it means for a practice of any description to be social. As will be seen, the field is not entirely devoid of analysis and reflection on the social character of social work but it is certainly unbalanced. Writing on the social part of the social work equation is a minor motif that makes periodic appearances in the literature only to disappear again before re-emerging in a different guise at a later date. This observation, of course, begs the question of why the practice is called 'social work' at all – why not public relief, resource planning, family and community support, local

authority welfare work, contextual correction, or similar? If social work is devoid of a body of theory and analysis about why it is social, then by what authority or for what purpose is that appellation self-proclaimed?

But the tension identified by Jacqui Smith is also visible in social work's 'meta-theory' – where social work reflects upon itself and on how it fits into more expansive sociological pictures of the world inhabited by its clients and its users. Witness David Howe, for example, writing on precisely the question that is at the heart of this paper:

In their day-to-day practice, social workers face a busy and complex world of *human behaviour in a social context*. It is a world in which relationships break down, emotional needs run high, and personal needs go unmet. It is a world in which some people have problems and some people are problems. (Howe, 1997, p.170, my emphasis)

I suggest that the shades of agreement between David Howe's meta-theoretical exploration and Jacqui Smith's practical injunction are not (primarily, at least) the consequence of some shared personal ideology. Rather, they are indicative of deeper problems in social work theory itself. In particular, they indicate a deal of ambivalence and anxiety about what the context of social work practice is and how (if at all) it is changing.

Note that I am not suggesting either that models of the social in social work literature are somehow remiss, or that the ordinary sociological models employed by social workers in their day-to-day practice are inadequate for the job. What I am interested in are those cases where the 'social' part of social work is expressed in a 'fluent and theoretical' manner because I suggest that these models define the ways that social work understands how and why people 'got into difficulties in the first place.' Or, at least, this is where social work attempts to articulate its most coherent visions of this process.

In pursuit of this analysis, the exploration of social work's 'social' component is divided into three parts. First, I look at some contemporary sociological themes with a view to situating social work theory in a wider framework of thinking about change in the contemporary world. Second, I look briefly at work that has been done on the historical emergence of the social as a discrete arena of public and private intervention. Where did the 'social' – as something that could be worked on or in or through – come from? Third, I consider some recent reformulations of these ideas of the social in the social work literature

## What's new?

Across the 1980s and 1990s a series of interrelated ideas spread throughout the social sciences and, to a lesser extent, became part of public discourse about the contemporary world. These ideas included *modernisation*, *globalisation*, *risk*, *networks*, *time-space compression*, and many more. In general, the proliferation and diffusion of these ideas signalled something of a shift in sociological theories of the economy, culture, nation and identity. In particular, it signalled a conceptual stampede to grasp the specificity of the present time and assert a vision of the forces driving contemporary social change. The new vision depicts the contemporary world as infinitely more complicated than, and disconnected from, its past: it is a world where uncertainty abounds and diversity reigns.

Witness Habermas, not the most pessimistic of commentators by a long way, for whom the contemporary world comprises a 'post national constellation' of 'disempowered' states and 'global economic networks' that have dissolved standardized living conditions and career patterns (2001. pp.69-71, 81, 155). It is a world of global and local exclusions, of fragmented political allegiances, individualised consumption-driven lifestyles and absent solidarity where fortified and fractured communities drift apart from each other under the weight of chronic income insecurity. This diagnosis draws, in part, from the work of Manuel Castells who argues that a new kind of society has grown in the soil of the information revolution. According to Castells (1997. p.1) the world we inhabit today:

... is characterised by the globalization of strategically decisive economic activities. By the networking form of organization. By the flexibility and instability of work, and the individualization of labour. By a culture of real virtuality constructed by a pervasive, interconnected, and diversified media system. And by the transformation of material foundations of life, space and time, through the constitution of a space of flows and of timeless time, as expressions of dominant activities and controlling elites.

This 'network society' has cut the historical roots from beneath communal identities, is disintegrating civil society, debasing state sovereignty and evaporating democratic politics (Castells, 1997. pp.59, 66, 307, 349). Indeed, so complicated has the present world become that, according to Urry (2003), it is:

... epistemologically and ontologically unknowable, with efforts at comprehension changing the very world that is being investigated. (p.16)

In spite of being unknowable, Urry suggests that it is a world of 'diverse networked time-space paths' and 'emergent systems possessing properties and patterns that are often far from equilibrium.' It is a world where 'unpredictable and yet irreversible patterns seem to characterize all social and physical systems' (Ibid: 7-8). So strange and unfathomable is this world that even the word *science* is placed in speech marks to denote its uncertain status and the concepts of *society* and the *social* are deemed inadequate to the task of its description.

Perhaps these formulations exemplify the kind of 'fluent and theoretical' explanations that were in Jacqui Smith's mind when she argued for the value primacy of social work's practical side. There seems little doubt that there is a great perceptual and emotional distance between a 'real virtuality' in a 'diverse networked time-space path' and, for example, introducing a grieving person to a bereavement support group or placing a child on the 'at risk' register – and suspicion of theoretical sophistication, at least initially, may appear justified on these grounds. But social work is about much more than individual well-being – whether this is explicitly acknowledged or not – and shares with sociology a basic irresolution both about the world in which it is practised and about the implications of the seemingly monumental transformations identified therein. Furthermore, theoretical language – in sociology and elsewhere – is intended at least partly to supply greater conceptual precision to widely voiced propositions about the state of the world we live in. What may appear as abstract and abstruse generalisations when plucked from their sociological context are in fact formalised statements of the logical relations between claims and counter-claims about what the world is 'really' like.

I make this point because recent writings on social work and social welfare share wider sociological diagnoses of the contemporary world, even if the sociological foundations of the diagnosis are not always acknowledged. Social work theory concurs with Urry's assessment of a fundamental unknowability about the world and Castells's insistence upon its novel complexity. So, for example, there is a tendency to posit a past that was simpler, more stable, more solid and less fluid than our globalised, networked, mobile present and to claim that 'old certainties' (however limited they were) have disappeared to be replaced by a 'confused eruption' of uncertainties (see Howe, 1996: 96; Hugman, 2001: 323; Dominelli, 2004: 3). Indeed, Parton makes the theme of uncertainty the organising principle of his edited collection, remarking on the extraordinary 'pace and intensity' of change (1996: 4) and on the 'increasing diversity, uncertainty, fragmentation, ambiguity and change' (ibid: 12) currently being experienced in social work. Nor, of course, is the influence of these ideas limited solely to sociology and social work. The diagnosis of lost certainties, increased confusion and fragmentation is an organising theme of a great deal of social scientific and related commentary

and analysis. There are many persuasive and memorable formulations of this diagnosis but I have chosen to quote from Jock Young's *The Exclusive Society* (1999) where, borrowing from Hobsbawm, he depicts recent social change as a failure of the 'compass':

The movement into late modernity is like a ship which has broken from its moorings. Many of the crew cry to return to the familiar sanctuary of the harbour but to their alarm the compass spins, the ship continues on its way and, looking back, the quay is no longer so secure: at times it seems to be falling apart, its structure fading and disintegrating. The siren voices which forlornly, seriously, soberly try to convince them that going back is possible are mistaken. (p.193)

The ship sails on but no-one knows where it is headed, the compass spins and points in no direction, there are no moorings to secure the vessel to anything solid and familiar. Beautifully written and typical of contemporary social scientific rumination on recent social change. The 'movement into modernity' (late or otherwise) is presented in the third person neutral – as something independent of the actions, thoughts and beliefs of the author – and it is the author's task to get a handle on the meaning or substance of the altered (and usually degraded) present. The quoted section is reminiscent of, and intellectually derived from, the various formulations of the same alleged phenomenon provided by Zygmunt Bauman who has spent over a decade lamenting the lost inclusiveness of the immediate post-war era.

It could be observed that this period in European history was not, in fact, as all-inclusive as contemporary commentary might be taken to imply: that endemic and institutionalised racism was a fundamental building block of everyday life; that strict sexism excluded many women from a wide range of male-dominated institutions and blamed their feminine failure for the problems with which they had to contend; that, in spite of increased social mobility, social class remained (and remains) one of the most decisive factors in your life chances; that religious affiliation divided communities and states in antagonistic and sometimes violent ways; that widespread poverty had not, in fact, been eradicated and that there were serious and life-harming divisions in access to income and wealth. All of this is true but it misses a crucial point. What is lamented in Young's (and Bauman's) writing is not so much the *actuality* of post-war social life as the *dream* of social belonging through which it was grasped. It is the dream of inclusiveness or, at least, a particular version of it that is 'fading and disintegrating' and no longer looks like a secure intellectual harbour in which to anchor ideas, beliefs and theories. What Young and Bauman see as impossible is a return to that dream – in which, in the context of the present paper, the welfare state in general, and

social services in particular, were meant to assist people to 'bring about a more comfortable 'fit' between themselves and constant social change' as the Gulbenkian Working Party on community work (1968: 29) put it, and to empower people to take control over their own lives and circumstances.

This dream is precisely the dream of social administration – the acceptance that change is inevitable but that it can be managed in such a way as to encourage collective solidarity and sustain a comforting sense of stability within whilst the maelstrom whirls without. If social workers were able to understand and work with the 'individual-within-their-situation', as Younghusband (1978) and others suggested, they might contribute to the progressive development of the wider society: incremental societal improvement could advance through episodic situational triumph. Although dependent on earlier articulations of social work's progressive remit, the strong thesis – that social work could contribute to societal advancement through its mundane encounters with the disadvantaged – flourished in the context of the post-war settlement and appeared as both a justification for and the realisation of the liberal democratic welfare compromise. Here, what is administered in social administration and what is serviced in the social services is collective solidarity. The 'social' comprises the links in the great chain of support that attaches each individual to the society at large.

What has thrown social work, alongside sociology, into confusion is the shattering of this dream and the disintegration of its terms of reference. The death of a dream, particularly one so influential and entrenched as this, deserves serious and considered attention beyond what I am able to supply in this paper. The following preliminary exploration is concerned with the dream's origins and contents – where did it come from and what were its constituent images? – and with its replacement – what images have been substituted and how do they re-present social work's social content?

## **Some origins of the social**

I do not intend to provide a full-blown genealogy of the social. Not only has this exercise been attempted before by Donzelot (1979) and, to a lesser extent, Ignatieff (1978) and Garland (1985) but the purpose of the present paper is to address more contemporary developments in social work thinking. Here, there follows only a brief summary of some of the more important themes in the emergence of an idea of the social with the aim of drawing some few lessons from history.

In his book *Keywords* Raymond Williams (1976) traces the cultural, literary and philosophical development of the concept of 'society'. Observing



that its early usage owed much to the bourgeois cultural habit of seasonal gatherings and functions – where the bourgeoisie considered themselves to be ‘in society’ – Williams goes on to note the expansion of this idea to refer to arranged, structured or formalised collective enterprises. Eventually, partly because of this formalisation, the term ‘society’ is used by Tönnies to distinguish the associative configuration of industrial, urban collective life from the communal configuration of agricultural, rural life.

But the concepts of ‘society’ and ‘the social’ do not develop in exact parallel. In particular, the notion that there is a specific realm or area of human life that is indubitably ‘social’, which can be transformed by ‘social reformers’ and, later, worked on by ‘social workers’ is the product of a very particular historical vector. This vector, moreover, diverges from the philosophical development of the concept of ‘society’ as a totality of rules, customs and rankings that binds people together and to which all members can be made to belong. The latter idea of society was an important conceptual and ideological resource in the political struggle between the aristocracy and the emerging bourgeoisie in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century and its intellectual utility for early social reform movements is well described by Ignatieff (1978). At base, it contains the proposition that all men and women are capable of just and good conduct – that criminals, paupers and the mad are not ‘incorrigible’ – and that by manufacturing the right (mental and social) associations crime can be curtailed, madness cured and pauperism (all but) abolished. The ‘reformation of men’, suggests Bentham comprises a ‘species of manufacture’ where an efficiently operating engine of reform would *produce* moral individuals by moulding their appetites and their habits (Ignatieff, 1978: 45-7). The reforming institutions of society – particularly, but not exclusively, the prison and asylum – could be put to the service of re-fashioning deviant individuals before returning them as useful subjects to the society at large.

This ‘inclusive’ conception of the social-as-totality is undermined as the nineteenth century progresses and is eventually supplanted by an idea of the social as a discrete and localised network of relationships through which individuals manage their own lives. Rather than a totalising system of abstract or universal rules and customs, the social came to describe those relationships – of family, neighbourhood, employment, community, religion, and so on – that connected the different parts of the society together. Of particular note is that this conception represented the social as diversity rather than homogeneity. Social work consisted in mobilising (different) personal, familial, communal and institutional resources on a case-by-case basis. Where Bentham had focused on the total institutionalisation of moral conduct and a manufactured imprinting of public status, later century reformers located the source of morality and the foundations of public status within the families



and communities of the distressed themselves. Instead of re-fashioning individuals in total institutions, later century reformers wanted to reinvigorate and revitalise the communal bonds that held the society together. Of prime importance was the family but its proper operation needed to be socially secured through the support of friends, neighbours, communities, religious and friendly societies and other 'social agencies' (see Garland, 1985: 119, 240). If the reformers held on to Bentham's idea of society as a great engine of moral progress they tempered their abstract faith by arguing that the engine needed to be lubricated and its parts regularly repaired if it was to run at maximum efficiency.

The conceptual shift described here may be subtle but it is also crucial: it furnishes a discourse through which public and private agencies can describe, explain, justify and predict the effects of their interventions. It provides, also, an experimental apparatus through which combinations of reforming practices can be co-ordinated in order to achieve different outcomes. Rather than focusing exclusively on reprogramming the deviant individual, social reform now turned its attention to re-organising and better managing the local contexts that (allegedly) gave rise to deviant individuals. The localised social thus marks out a new relationship between the reformers and the objects of their practice: instead of conceptualising reform as the total institutional manufacture of desirable associations, it was portrayed as a multitude of institutional and everyday processes – ones that could be managed, organised, supervised, monitored and governed. The social, in short, came to represent a micro-political technology for the administration of welfare in practice<sup>1</sup> and the discipline that later emerged to provide intellectual justification for this technological fix was the aptly named 'social administration.'

Two points can be drawn from this brief historical reflection. First, there are no innocent ideas of what the social comprises: there is no object or state of affairs 'out there' that is quintessentially or foundationally social in any timeless sense. Ideas about what the social comprises inform the practices of those charged with delivering services but they do not in any simple way reflect the real conditions or circumstances of those practices. Second, and closely related, the label 'social worker' is not a neutral or disinterested descriptor of what some groups of professionals do. It is located within particular conceptual frameworks about the ways that collective life can be managed, supported and threatened. To be sure, the frameworks change (as discussed below) but this only reinforces the need for social workers to be critically aware of the origins, potentials and pitfalls of those frameworks.

## Some contemporary nuances

Contemporary ideas about the social character of social work betray the influence of earlier ideas. There is a clear echo of the Charity Organisation Society (COS), for instance, in Jordan's suggestion that social work 'begins where community has difficulty in providing,' and seeks to 'strengthen the bonds of inclusive membership.' The echo is loudest in his critique of New Right market individualism where he extols the virtues of social work's 'original role in communities' and raises 'old questions' about 'how it can again help to provide the moral glue that every society needs if it is to achieve prosperity and harmony' – even urging a return to social work's 'late nineteenth-century beginnings.' There are, of course, some clear differences. Where social work, for the COS, aimed to incorporate the distressed and indigent into the private institutions of a putatively efficient and functional society, for Jordan it aims to make amends for an iniquitous and malfunctioning one. Those in need of social work assistance, for Jordan, do not comprise casualties of fate – sickness, bereavement, infirmity, for example – but casualties of 'undesirable social consequences of commercial contractual relations' or, in other words, capitalism (Jordan, 1997, pp.9, 11,13, 21).<sup>2</sup>

For Jordan, then, social work theory and practice carries within it not a validation (as for the COS) but a critique of society: a critique that exposes the broken communities and the social faultlines (the societal fragmentation, decline, weakness, polarization and precariousness) inflicted by capitalist development. In these circumstances, social work is about gluing together the shattered pieces, reconstructing (with improvements) what earlier reformers had built. The problem, however, is that there is no pattern and no design specifications to tell social workers which bits fit where, nor any indication that the moral glue applied will do what it says on the tin. So far from society being a great engine of reform manufacturing useful subjects, social workers, in Jordan's world, face something more like a broken piece of flat-pack furniture with no instructions and an infinite number of parts. Moreover, in spite of the number remaining, most of the original parts are missing. The traditional communities and the mass solidarities that gave shape to social work's moral mission have been destroyed and many of the organisations that linked clients, unions, professions and politics died with them. In this case, the nostalgic response – going back in time to get it right – is not a feasible option: those *specific* mass solidarities, traditional communities, patterns of membership that comprised the now-broken structure cannot be recreated.

An alternative – entrepreneurial – response is to build bridges or make connections across the divisions rather than apply rivers of glue to stick them together. The vision of social work as bridge-building rests on an entirely different concept of what constitutes the social. For example, in contrast to a

single broken structure crying out for moral glue, Dominelli suggests that the social is 'created as a fluid, multidimensional, contradictory, ambiguous and uncertain domain,' providing a 'contextualized and negotiated space within which practice occurs' (Dominelli, 2004, p.42). There are some tensions in this account between the term's theoretical and descriptive status. In some places the social is said to comprise a space between social conventions and structural inequalities (p.15). Elsewhere, the social is *constituted* through the 'negotiation of understandings and experienced realities' (p.42). Elsewhere again, it is portrayed as a structure of relations that 'configure culture' and legitimize institutions (p.251). In some places the social is that which *mediates* between cultural divisions (p.43). Elsewhere, the social is that which is *mediated* by social work practitioners (p.251).

Nonetheless, Dominelli's theoretical argument can be seen to differ from Jordan's in important and fundamental ways. Society is not, in Dominelli's vision, the *structure* that provides the context for what social workers do. Instead, it is a *space* separating multidimensional domains – of collective identity and tradition, of institutions and movements, formal systems and informal conventions, economic transactions and cultural affiliations – and the social is realised only through negotiations between those domains. In this vision, the 'reflexively critical' social worker 'navigates the interstices of the social' or, in other words, sails the seas that separate islands of cultural and economic difference. The social work task is not to glue the bits back together but, in an updating of Disraeli, to facilitate concourse between separated domains (rather than nations). What is social about social work is its connectivity: it reaches across the empty spaces gouged out by neo-liberal capitalist relations and hooks up networks of support and empowerment. Its purpose is not to cement individuals and groups in a monolithic welfare structure but to enable communities of difference to create mutually supportive configurations of services and resources.

Dominelli's vision may be seen, in some senses, as a modernising of social work's ideological outlook. She assimilates some of social work's traditional moral concerns into a scheme that redraws the sociological picture of what those concerns look like in practice. Whilst social work theorists of a leftist persuasion tend not to dispute the moral concern there is some disagreement over the sociological picture. For example, it has been suggested that interstitiality is not a substantial element of what social workers do. It is, instead, a consequence of what is being done to social work. Clarke (1996: 54-5), for example, argues that changes to social work governance have pushed social service delivery into the 'interstices between organisations.' Social workers inhabit these spaces not because of some ontological condition of the social itself but because of the destruction of the *ancien régime* of the post-war welfare state wrought principally (but not solely) by the neo-Conservative

onslaught from the late 1970s onwards. In Clarke's (2004) view, the social in social policy generally is part of a strategy that challenges assumptions of natural difference – based on gender, 'race', life stage, among others. The social, in effect, is the outcome of struggles to 'socialise' inequalities and exclusions, to have them recognised as the consequence of what is done to people rather than what people are, and is constructed as a 'site of integrative compromises' (Clarke, 2004, p.55) around state responses to (primarily) class inequalities. The definition of inequalities as socially produced, rather than naturally given, Clarke suggests, 'produces a view of difference, division and inequality as contestable and capable of being redressed' (p.57). The social, as hegemonic project geared towards 'denaturalising difference,' confronts the 'partial, contradictory and unstable character of dominant strategies' of political control. As with Dominelli, this theoretical vision of the social as a strategy or project sits uneasily alongside Clarke's descriptive use of the same term – where 'social groups' and 'social blocs' can be mobilised in pursuit of (or in opposition to) the socialising agenda of leftist politics (p.70-71). Leaving aside these minor conceptual tensions, it is clear that the strategy, for Clarke, is a desirable good: an expansive policy of socialising inequalities and exclusions becomes a moral duty for a 'socially just' welfare system and social workers, by extension, are charged with an ethical responsibility to contribute to the expansionist project.

A similar argument, couched in different terms, is put forward by Howe (1996) where he claims that the social is a 'discourse' that has changed over time. Howe's main interest is not in a full-blown history of this discourse but in its post-Thatcher character. Like Clarke, Howe proposes that 'the political pendulum has swung away from the social, the collective and the communal towards the free but isolated individual' (Howe, 1996, p.94). It is the swing of the pendulum – the altered political vision of the individual and his/her environment – that is at the heart of social work's troubles: the social has been (discursively) removed from social work practice and Howe urges its return (p.97).

If the contents of my bibliography are representative, much of what has just been outlined is commonsensical and familiar to any trained social worker. The social is complicated, precarious, under attack, in danger of disappearing altogether unless new alliances are forged to combat the insidious ideologies of the New Right which, allegedly, leave the isolated individual powerless before the market. The fragmented forms of contemporary resistance may be less amenable to collective mobilisation in these days of global, networked, fluid relationships but a return to or an expansion of *social* welfare demands a revitalised political commitment to collectivity – even if the collective is redefined to include 'difference'. However, all of these claims rest on the assumption that the social encapsulates something desirable about social

work: that it is social work's social component that raises it above the level of private troubles and locates it in the realm of public-democratic action. The assumption is questionable at least on the grounds that uncertainty persists around which version or which parts of the social provide the vehicle for making the ascent from private to public, from trouble to action. Howe, for example, associates a return to the social with a return to 'the collective and the communal' but does not define which kinds of communality and collectivity he has in mind.

This point is important because it has been claimed that social 'discourses' do indeed derive from and are embedded in specific kinds of communality and collectivity: they are not neutral in relation to the world they construct. Indeed, elements of this outlook can be found in Clarke's concern with 'formations' of the welfare-nation-state triad and in Williams' earlier (1989) exploration of the place of family, 'race' and nation in the development of welfare schemes. A strong version of the thesis is put forward by Rojek et al. (1988) who portray the social in social work as, variously, an 'altar of self-disclosure', an 'environment of organised intimacy', and a 'type of social consciousness' (modernism) which 'views itself and the world as dynamic, many-sided, fragmentary, and discontinuous' (pp.147, 155, 161). Their point is that the social character of social work cannot be understood outside of the framework of received ideas through which social workers grasp the nature of their practical activities. This framework encodes beliefs, values and projects that betray their political and ideological locatedness in specific kinds of communality and collectivity. In particular, they argue, there is not a non-ideological 'social' through or in which social workers can contextualise their practice because the very languages used to describe that context – whether 'traditional' or 'radical' – 'are firmly embedded in bourgeois society' and reflect bourgeois demands for the rational administration of the poor (Rojek et al, (1988, p.173). What is social about social work, in this vision, is not the *moral* commitment to connectivity, collectivity or communality *per se*, but the *rational* reflection of bourgeois ideology and the divisive implementation of bourgeois governance. Social work realises communality and collectivity not in general and abstract senses but in particular and material senses. Needs are grouped, populations are classified, geographies are solidified, boundaries are policed and it is these political activities, rooted in bourgeois discourses of what collectivity and communality comprise, that produce social work's social component. Indeed, so insidious is bourgeois ideology in social work (and social welfare more generally) thought to be that Rojek et al. are induced to drop 'social' from their repertoire and extol the virtues of 'participatory welfare' instead (ibid: 178).

## Conclusion

Dreams are necessary, says Dominelli (2004, p.241), 'to envisage alternative practices.' However, in so far as the dreams being discussed here are not the random and distorted visions of the sleeper, but organized expressions of beliefs, values and ambitions, then it behoves social work to maintain a grip on the dream's unfolding. In other words, it is *necessary* to offer 'fluent and theoretical explanations' of why people got into difficulties in the first place in order to maintain any serious suggestion that social work has a progressive remit. In this regard, my aim has been to explore some influential articulations of social work's understanding of its social character. What I have done is to take a preliminary look at the replacement images and figures that are filling the theoretical vacuum left by the demise of the dream of social administration. This exploration has found a mix of contradictory visions and ambitions in which some social workers seek to repair a broken structure by the application of moral glue; some seek to build bridges across the 'interstices' of fluid domains; some seek to expand the size of and collectivize some of the structure's pieces; and others are busy blowing up the bridges, dissolving the glue and sailing off on the good ship 'participatory welfare.'

Social work theory does not develop in a vacuum. It shares concepts and diagnoses with many disciplines and I have identified important overlaps between social work assessments of the contemporary world and wider social science assessments. As social work cannot grasp the social consequences of its practical activity without some sophisticated theoretical scaffolding, I conclude that social scientific theory is necessary content of any forward-looking social work education programme.

## Notes

1. The materialism and associationism of this construct retains vestiges of earlier conceptions of social reform, notably Bentham's proclamation that the reform of men amounts to a 'species of manufacture' (see Ignatieff, 1990, p.46) in which the objective is to make all the separate parts function in well-oiled efficient synchrony. The calculating coldness (to our eyes) of this vision was later challenged through the Settlement Movement (amongst others), giving rise to the ideology of 'community' in social welfare provision whilst the 'inclusivist' vision shifted its attention to ideas of nation and race. Here, we do not have the space to dig into the 'community' construct but it provides no more solid conceptual ground than its 'social' accomplice.
2. See also Jordan's more analytical treatment of these questions (Forsythe & Jordan, 2002)

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